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ABSTRACT

This brief paper presents guidelines for creating useful Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) as required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. It lists 10 items of information that the law requires be included in an IEP such as current levels of educational performance and measurable goals and objectives. The importance of connecting the IEP with classroom instruction is stressed as is the requirement that the IEP be reviewed at least annually. Participants in the IEP process are identified and they are urged to view it as a dynamic process wherein professionals, parents, and students can plan for an instructional future that is truly responsive to the student's unique individual needs. (DB)

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Creating Useful Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

Stephen W. Smith

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) is the cornerstone of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which ensures educational opportunity for students with disabilities. The IEP is a quasi-contractual agreement to guide, orchestrate, and document *specially designed instruction* for each student with a disability based on his or her unique academic, social, and behavioral needs.

By law, the IEP must include certain information about the child and the educational program designed to meet his or her unique needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). This information includes:

- Current levels of educational performance
- Measurable goals and measurable objectives or benchmarks
- Special education and related services
- The extent of participation with nondisabled children
- A statement of how the child's progress will be measured and how parents will be informed of that progress
- The extent of modification of participation in state and district-wide tests
- The dates and location of services to be provided
- Beginning at age 14 (or younger), a statement of transition services the student will need to reach post-school goals
- Beginning at age 16 (or younger), a statement of transition services to help the child prepare for leaving school
- Beginning at least one year before the child reaches the age of maturity, a statement that the student has been told of any rights that will transfer to him or her.

In defining the IEP and making these requirements, the intent of Congress was to bring together teachers, parents, and students to develop an educational program that is tailored to the student's needs and provides documentation of a quality education based on those individual needs (Smith, 1990). Over the years, however, complying with the explicit tenets of the law (i.e., procedures related to developing and documenting an IEP) took precedence over developing a high quality program that educators can implement for each student who has special needs (Smith & Brownell, 1995). Planning and implementing a procedurally sound IEP will always be a challenge. The developers of IEPs must deliver a high-quality framework to help teachers perform at their best in providing specially designed instruction for each of their students with disabilities.

Connecting the IEP and Classroom Instruction

The law clearly states that a relationship should exist between the IEP and classroom activities. Each student's present level of performance should serve as the basis for IEP annual goals and objectives. This basic link between the student's needs and his or her program represents the very essence of special education and specially designed instruction.

Every effort should be made to ensure that each annual goal and short-term objective is directly related to the statement of the student's present level of performance. In this way, annual goals and objectives are based on assessment data and not on unfounded beliefs about programs thought to be beneficial to the student, irrespective of diagnostic findings.

The IEP should contain goals and objectives for all areas in which the student cannot substantially benefit from the regular education program, including related services. One suggestion is that an average of 4 short-term objectives for each of 4 to 10 annual goals could be a recommended standard.

In planning interventions, the IEP team needs to take into account the student's current skill level, the teacher's skill, the resources, and the likelihood that the intervention will be implemented. This last factor often depends upon the (a) effectiveness of the intervention, (b) the length of time and skill required for the intervention, and (c) the significance of the student's needs.

The IEP must be reviewed at least annually, and goals and objectives are modified as the student continues to demonstrate mastery. The attainment of the stated objectives is measured by daily performance as determined by the teacher and frequent objective measures of the student's ability to perform the skills needed to attain the goal. The criterion for mastery should be of a type and level appropriate to the behavior being learned. If the objectives subordinate to a goal are sequenced by a task analysis, the standard for mastery should be the level of the skill needed to address the next objective.

Participants in Developing IEPs

The IEP can be a dynamic process wherein professionals, parents, and sometimes students, can plan for an instructional

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future that is truly responsive to the student's unique individual needs. When professionals understand the necessity for the IEP and the opportunity it provides for collaboration, dynamic planning, and successful implementation, the lawful intent of specially designed instruction will be fulfilled. The IEP can be viewed as the product of the referral process and it can be viewed as an educational outline delineating the major part of the service and delivery process. When professionals do not understand the IEP process, problems with developing and implementing IEPs may stem from their differing roles and perspectives.

- Content teachers may feel untrained to handle the academic and behavioral needs for special education students. They may feel that the input from specialists is too unrealistic for implementation in the regular classroom, or they may feel that IEP goals and objectives are only for the special education teacher and not relevant in their day-to-day instruction. Because of these attitudes, special educators may feel that they lack cooperation from regular education teachers, particularly in facilitating the mainstreaming of students with special needs.

- Parents may be concerned about including their children in regular classes and whether they will be provided with the support services required for success.

- The IEP may be perceived as a document that is prepared by individuals who are not involved in the daily learning activities of the child. Similarly, the IEP may be viewed as unnecessary paperwork that must be completed, with the special education teacher mostly responsible for its development. Another problem is that developing an IEP is often seen as cumbersome and time consuming. Finally, the IEP may be perceived as involving persons whose specific job is the evaluation of children, rather than seeing the gathering of information from a more ecological viewpoint (i.e., from many different settings).

In an effort to address some of these problems, the IDEA requires that the following participants be involved in the IEP meeting.

- The student, if appropriate
- A parent (and, if desired, the family)
- At least one of the student's special education teachers or, if appropriate, related services providers
- At least one of the student's regular education teachers
- A local educational agency representative
- Other agency personnel who have knowledge or expertise required to best serve the student's needs.

The goal of the IEP is to deliver a comprehensive, free and appropriate education, with the involvement of many participants. With these participants present, the IEP meeting can focus on developing an accurate and relevant description of the child's strengths and weaknesses in many different settings, including the current educational setting. This more open perspective allows for the shared responsibility of educating children with disabilities among all involved professionals. With this shared responsibility, it is more likely that both the regular and special education daily programming will concentrate on the identified goals of the IEP.

Involving a variety of participants in developing the IEP also increases the number of professionals available to deliver the needed support and guidance. Their participation as a decision-making team will provide essential and relevant information, allow for evaluating data provided by other professionals, and enhance cooperation as team members. It is hoped that the expanded knowledge and awareness of the involved professionals and a more complete view of their services and expertise will result. When professionals understand the necessity for the IEP and the opportunity it provides for collaboration, dynamic planning, and successful implementation, the lawful intent of specially designed instruction will be fulfilled.

Resources

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